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ABSTRACT

Almost since schools began in America, boys have been identified as the primary source of misbehavior by teachers and administrators. In addition, boys constitute the greatest percentage of those students who are underachieving and failing. This paper discusses the problems of misbehavior, underachievement, and related conditions; explores the two major factors contributing to boys' school-related problems--the home and the school (buildings and facilities, curriculum, materials, methodology, and teachers); and considers what can be done to rectify the problems, including specific ways in which schools and teachers can adjust to the learning styles, behavior patterns, and interests of boys. The paper concludes that what is needed most is teachers who are open, flexible, and fair with all students, regardless of their sex or their behavior patterns. (JM)

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FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO MISBEHAVIOR AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL BOYS

by

Floyd Sucher

Almost since schools began in America, boys have been identified as the primary source of misbehavior by teachers and administrators. They likewise comprise the greatest percentage of those who are underachieving and failing. This paper reviews the status of boys, home and school factors which seem to contribute to the situation, and recommendations for some possible changes.

Almost without exception when teachers are asked who gives them the most trouble in the elementary school classroom, the response is "BOYS!" They respond similarly when asked which students make the least academic progress. The writer's seven years of research in achievement demonstrate that the problem is real, but can be significantly reduced. For purposes of discussing the problem, this article is presented in three parts: (1) the problem of misbehavior, underachievement and related conditions, (2) factors that seem to contribute to the conditions, and (3) consideration of what might be done about the situation.

Misbehavior, Underachievement and Related Conditions

Misbehavior

Misbehavior is difficult to analyze as an isolated topic because it interplays with so many other conditions in a person's life. It

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is made complex by the extreme and diverse ways it finds expression, from complete silent withdrawal to violent physical explosions. It is often related to underachievement and other social and psychological problems of society. Three of these related problems are discussed in the following pages.

Underachievers.

One only needs to visit a few remedial reading classes, learning disability rooms, or education clinics to discover boys comprise the majority of those referred for service. Mumpower (19) reported that 70 percent of those referred to the Education Center at S.W. Louisiana University over a ten-year period, were boys. Honicker (13) noted that nearly 80 percent of all students referred to Title I Centers for help were boys, even though boys revealed the same initial ability and readiness as girls. Boldt and Sucher (1) found that boys constituted 82 percent of those identified by elementary teachers as the slowest five readers in the classroom. Further observation by the researchers revealed that the social behavior of the boys identified was aggressive and inattentive in nearly all cases.

From data collected in Maryland, Greenwood (11) reported that eight times as many boys were in the slowest reading group and six times as many boys were referred for special services when comapred with girls. These same teachers felt that boys were seven times more frequently the source of behavior problems.

Denny (3) in a review of 1800 students in Special Education in Canton, Ohio, stated that 82.9 percent of those in learning and behavioral disorders classes were boys. Others (23, 25, 26) have evidenced that boys make up a vastly disproportionate share of low achievers,

delinquents and rebels.

A second indicator of low achievement is the number of children required to repeat grades. Even though the practice of retaining children dramatically diminished during the 50's and 60's, it is still an indicator of poor progress. Peltier (23) reports that nearly two-thirds of all grade repeaters are boys. Other reports suggest the percentage may be nearer 75 percent.

Delinquency and dropout.

Delinquency rates are significantly higher among boys than girls. Boys exercise a more rebellious attitude when confined to school and have a delinquency rate that exceeds girls by five times (25). There is much speculation concerning what causes boys to skip school more often than girls. Underachievement, lack of interest, and relationship with the teacher are frequently cited factors.

The large number of boys who drop out of school is another related factor. Despite the fact that more boys than girls enter school, more girls graduate from high school. Sextor (24) and Denny (3) conclude that boys outnumber girls more than six to four on dropout. An analysis of the academic progress of dropouts and delinquents portrays them typically as poor students who are retarded in reading four or more years.

Mental health problems and suicide.

Related to all of these conditions is the high percentage of mental health problems and suicide occurring among boys. On the basis of treatment in psychiatric facilities, boys outnumber girls at all ages (20). Between the ages of six and nine boys outnumber girls 4-1 and between ten and nineteen they outnumber girls 2-1.

Winicoff and Resnik (28) reported that suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among young people, exceeded only by accidents,

maliganancy and homicide. Figures published by the U.S. Bureau of Vital Statistics (27) reveals a consistent increase in death by suicide among young people since 1960. The report of 1972 shows that four times as many boys commit suicide as girls.

Closely related to these two topics is the degeneration of self-concept. Feiker (5) suggests that students experience a major decline in their self-concept in the elementary grades. Boys go from their highest self-concept to their lowest self-concept between 1st and 4th grade. Their recovery is gradual and difficult.

The combination of these conditions does not paint a happy picture of the status of boys in the public schools. Because they interrelate so closely with failure, underachievement, and "behavior problems", they must all be considered in examining conditions which militate against boys' potential achievement.

Factors Contributing to Misbehavior and Underachievement

Many factors contribute to the unhappy plight of boys but the majority are associated with what happens in the home and in the school.

The Home

Prior to the time children enter school, the family has been the prime molder of their behavior patterns and learning styles. While it has never been the overt intention of parents to train a boy to have difficulty in school, they do interact with boys in ways which establish behavior patterns that contribute to teachers perceiving them as misbehavior problems and underachievers.

Very soon after birth a difference appears in the physical contact and interaction patterns between parents and children. Goldberg and Lewis (10) concluded that (1) more girls than boys are

breastfed, (2) there are more physical contacts between mothers and girls, (3) mothers vocalize significantly more to girls than to boys, (4) infant girls are more attached to mothers, and (5) girls are more helpless and boys more independent in separation situations.

Boys from early ages are given more independent, unsupervised time. This is especially true of outdoor time. During these periods of time; discovery, explorations, and independence become the natural process of learning.

Studies by McCarthy (17), Gnagey (9), and Sexton (25) suggest that boys identify with their fathers, but the father is seldom present. Their behaviors are more independent and stress aggressiveness, action, and movement. Courage, daring, and speaking-out are honored among boys, whereas timidity and quietness are considered feminine.

Studies by Flaherty (7) and Gallup International (15) link under-achievement to differences in play activities. Girls' play activities of sewing, weaving, coloring, and simple games which require sequenced procedures facilitate development of both skill and attention span. The free, non-structured play of boys, often more physical and less structured, encourages creativity and discovery, but doesn't always contribute to listening or motor skill development related to success in school.

The meager amount and infrequent language interaction between boys and adults is another limiting factor. The speech model and interactor for children is primarily the mother. Because of more common interests and experiences, the girl not only has more language interaction, but more pleasant and satisfying interaction. On the other hand, a boy's interaction is less frequent and tends to be more

negative and disciplinary -- "What have you been into now?!", "Don't bring that dirty thing in here!", "How did you get so dirty?!"

As a result of these many conditions and practices, boys often arrive at school with learning styles, behavior patterns, and interests that are not compatible with practices of the school:

1. They possess an independent, nondirected, discovery-oriented learning style which is typically contrary to traditional teaching patterns (obedient, submissive, teacher-directed),
2. they express aggressive, moving, vocal, action-filled behavior patterns that are equally unacceptable to teachers, and
3. their interests in natural science, physical science, and physical education activities and skills are not met in kindergarten and first grade curriculua.

The School

Once they begin school, the three conditions described above are magnified and several additional circumstances occur that contribute to a boy's underachievement and misbehavior. The school factors include buildings and facilities, curriculum, materials, methodology, and teachers.

Buildings and Materials. After five years of freedom of movement and action, school buildings in general and classrooms in particular are confining and restricting to the pattern of boy behavior. This is not to suggest that boys should not develop ability to operate in more restricted environments. However, the transition could be more gradual. And it would seem instruction at all levels could benefit from more outdoor learning centers or less restricted facilities.

Facilities within a primary classroom typically are not designed to accomodate noise and activity. Most contain play houses, toy areas and quiet centers. Few classrooms have science areas that allow for experimentation or construction areas for hammering and building.

Curriculum. The curriculum of early grades has often lacked subjects of specific interest to boys. Notable omissions include topics in physical science such as machines, the earth's surface (geology), and gases and chemistry. While physical development is in its early stages, there are many physical skills and activities that could be added to a P.E. program in the primary grades. Most boys enjoy climbing, wrestling, and tumbling activities before entering school.

Boys also tend to be more generalistic and practical in their approach to learning. Therefore, learning of specifics must serve some immediate useful end for them, or it will seem wasteful or of little value. For example, an activity of throwing and catching a ball soon loses interest for boys. They would much prefer to play a ball game even though they are not proficient in the skills or knowledgeable about the rules. Curriculum, thus, must be related and applied frequently to useful outcomes.

Content of materials. Selection of content in materials that is of little interest to boys has been a major reason for low motivation to learn. Historically, reading books have been woefully lacking in content of interest to boys. Research (26, 8) on reading interests is just beginning to have an effect on selection of content. Pedantic family stories which have prevailed in beginning readers are making way to more stimulating subjects of animals, sports, adventures,

mysteries, and scary stories which are ranked among the first five in interest by boys as compared to 51st place for family stories.

Methodology. Methodology refers to the way ideas, concepts, or skills are conveyed to a child and the way the teacher organizes the class for receiving it. The primary mode of instructing in kindergarten and first grade has been an oral-aural approach with the teacher "telling" and, hopefully, the child "listening." This is sometimes accompanied with supportive visual material. Traditionally, boys have not been good listeners. Their learning has been more physical and visual. The amount of negative oral direction they have received prior to entering school and, unfortunately, often after entering the classroom causes many to "turn-off" the teacher during oral instruction.

There is much room for improvement in the methodology of conveying concepts to the learner in other than an oral procedure. One study (21) conducted with kindergarten and first grade children used limited oral instruction and predominantly physically manipulated and visual materials in a self-directed, discovery setting. When compared with students using the traditional oral instruction, paper-pencil application approach, both boys and girls in the experimental group scored significatly better in decoding, word recognition, and comprehension skills.

A second methodology concern is related to organization and timing of instruction. This is best explained by two illustrations.

Upon entering a kindergarten classroom in November, the author observed the teacher sitting with the class in a large group on the floor. The teacher was introducing the letter form for three letters.

It soon became apparent the eleven little boys in the outside edge of the group were not interested. There was the typical laguhing, pushing, slugging, pulling, and falling over. For 15 minutes, the teacher struggled through numerous distractions and "misbehaviors". At the conclusion of the period, the author was given permission to individually test the class for knowledge of letter names. All eleven "trouble-makers" readily identified all of the letters in the alphabet in upper and lower case.

In another setting, a kindergarten class of twenty-seven youngsters was receiving similar instruction in learning to identify the letters of the alphabet, one letter per week. In November a test was given to the group revealing that one child read at a third grade level, one read at a second grade level, and nine at the primer or first grade level. On that November testing date, the author noted that one boy who could read had a letter "G" stamped on the back of his hand. When asked if he didn't already know the letter "G", the student cheerfully responded "Yeah, but not upside down." The teacher had stamped the letter on the hand so that she could read it. Nevertheless she continued to introduce one letter per week. Twenty weeks later in March, the last letter was introduced to a not-so-dutiful-attentive class.

The point in both examples is the need for the teacher to know and more nearly meet the individual needs of each child. Boys frequently become behavior problems because they already know what the teacher is presenting. Perhaps even more frequently they lose interest and create problems because they don't understand what is being presented or haven't had the background to move to new levels of instruction. In both cases, organizing to the individual needs is basic to solving many "behavior" problems.

Teachers. The last and undoubtedly most influential factor affecting behavior and underachievement of boys is the teacher. More and more studies (1,13) support the belief that boys and girls differ very little in intellectual ability or intellectual readiness to succeed in first grade. Yet, by the time they reach 4th grade, boys make up 80 percent of those identified as failing or underachieving.

Certainly, teachers do not intentionally try to fail boys or establish relationships that would inhibit their opportunity to succeed. Indeed, most teachers feel they are equally fair or even show preferences to boys. Research shows, however, that in daily contact teachers are unfair to boys. The author suspects it is not intentional but rather complete unawareness on the part of the teacher. It might be said that teachers secretly dislike boys, but just don't know it. For purpose of examples let us examine six different relationships:

1. Student perception and expectation. Do teachers perceive students as students perceive themselves? Donaldson (4), Holland (14), and Felsenthal (6) report that teachers most frequently perceive boys negatively, particularly slower students. When comparing a teacher's perception of students with the students' perception of themselves or herself, women teachers achieved high correlations with girls but were significantly lower in correlations with boys' self perception.

Pilardy (22) points out that boy students are less successful because their teachers believe they will be. In surveying 63 first grade teachers, he found only five who believed that boys could learn as well as girls. He watched these five with five teachers who believed they wouldn't do as well. Boys in the first group did as well as the girls but those with teachers who expected them to do poorly

achieved the expectation. It seems that teachers cannot avoid communicating their attitudes to children. Pupils then begin to perceive and value themselves as they perceive their teachers value them. This perception becomes positively associated with the students' actual performance.

2. Interaction and questioning. Do teachers interact as frequently and as positively with boys as they do with girls? A study at the University of Missouri (2) showed that during question and discussion sessions, boys tried eight times more frequently than girls to respond. However, women teachers called upon girls ten times more frequently than they called upon boys. A University of California study (2) reported that during questioning activities, teachers waited 7.7 seconds for girls to respond to questions, but allowed boys only 2.2 seconds.

Teachers tend to ignore or reject boys' responses and contributions at twice the rate they do girls' responses. When boys are unable to respond, teachers frequently redirect the questions to girls. Although most teachers contend they are impartial in their treatment of students, the evidence cited here does not substantiate that belief.

3. Grading. Are grades administered on an unbiased basis? Studies as early as 1933 (18) say no. Bradley (2) suggests that at all levels when grades are administered, girls are typically given better grades without having earned them. One study conducted with high school seniors reported that on the basis of achievement test scores, boys scored higher in all areas but English; however, the letter grades they received in corresponding classes were significantly lower.

Many teachers are swayed in their grading practices by social behavior and physical appearance. On one occasion one teacher misplaced an elementary school grade roll just prior to preparing report cards. It became necessary to administer letter grades without any records. Each student was assigned a grade for each subject. Three weeks later the grade roll was found and the proper grades computed. Girls had been given a higher average grade on their report cards than they had earned and boys had been given a lower average grade on their report cards than they had achieved. The difference was essentially one full letter grade.

4. Discipline. Do boys receive more frequent discipline and more severe punishments? Greenwood (11) in reporting a study involving 109 teachers in Maryland noted that teachers directed five times more negative responses to boys than girls; administered ten times as many punishments to boys, and allowed girls three times the number of privileges given to boys. Boys "stay in" longer, write more pages, and are denied more desired activities than girls for committing similar offenses.

In studies comparing aggressive behavior of boys versus conforming "nice" behavior of girls, Kohlberg (16) noted that niceness is an important value to girls. Sears and Feldman (24) concluded that teachers consider aggression to be "badness". They also suggested that boys receive significantly more blame than girls and when criticizing boys, teachers used harsh, angry tones, but with girls they used a normal tone. It seems teachers often establish standards for good behavior of children but forget to establish standards for equitably reacting to "unacceptable" behavior.

5. Language. Do teachers favor masculine or feminine language? While it isn't a major item, both men and women teachers reject many terms more frequently used by boys such as "gut", "slug", "bash", etc, labeling them crude while a more "refined" term for the same word is accepted. As a result, boys are sometimes more hesitant to respond or become involved, thinking the teacher will only reject what they say anyway.

6. Discrimination between intellectual, social and emotional behavior. Do teachers distinguish between a child's intellectual, social and emotional behavior? It is a common practice for teachers to identify failing or misbehaving students as "immature", when in reality the student may be intellectually advanced. This practice of failing to discriminate between intellectual development, social maturity and emotional stability may well be the source of many students' underachievement, problem relationships and subsequent failure.

Often when a boy doesn't know how to respond to frustration or to teacher correction, he is called immature. If he doesn't maintain model self-discipline according to established standards of behavior, he is labeled immature. In both cases it is frequently assumed he is not ready or incapable of learning.

Boldt and Sucher (1) found that first grade teachers frequently confuse social behavior with intellectual progress. When asked to identify the five poorest readers in the class, teachers often selected boys who were noisy, inattentive, and active. When reading tests were administered to the class, scores revealed that often the "five poorest readers" were average and above average readers while many other students in the class scored lower.

Harmon (12) conducted a study in which teacher trainees were assigned to instruct a group of four to six first grade children in reading. Every three weeks, the trainees ranked the students according to their perception of the students' progress in reading. The students were then tested to determine skill progress during the three week period. An observer was assigned to rank the social behavior patterns of the students during the same period. Correlations were computed comparing the trainees' rankings with skill test result rankings and with social behavior rankings. Correlations were consistently higher between trainee rankings with social behavior rankings than trainee rankings with skill test rankings. This suggests the trainees were influenced by social behavior and not fully aware of the actual reading progress many students achieved. Since boys are more frequent offenders of social behavior standards, they are often misjudged in their intellectual progress. This misjudgement of intellectual ability is conveyed to the child and he soon begins to believe he can't succeed and acts accordingly.

What Can Be Done ~~About It~~

Children of the future will come to school with backgrounds and training similar to those from the past and present. Girls are becoming more assertive but boys will continue to comprise the majority of the independent, aggressive, active souls in the classroom. Society in general expects it of them. It would seem, therefore, that the schools and teachers must make the adjustment to the learning style, behavior patterns, and interests of boys.

In order to improve instruction for boys in the future, several specific steps could be taken:

Facilities

Attention should be given to providing more outside teaching stations. These could be sheltered areas with work tables and patio furniture. Many types of regular instruction could occur in such a facility and it could be used incidently before school, during recesses and lunch hour, and after school. Planned open science areas could be used for many types of instruction and independent learning. They might include garden space, multiple types of plants and natural habitat for exploration and experimentation.

Within the school building and classroom attention should be given to two factors: areas which will accommodate abnormal amounts of noise and physical activity such as construction and experimentation without causing damage. Garages, shops and labs that allow for pounding, cutting, and experimenting would allow boys an opportunity to use their energies constructively and would let them speak more freely without disturbance to others.

Curriculum

The primary grade curriculum should include more physical sciences, natural sciences, and certain areas of physical education. Most classrooms presently give little attention to the study of machines and how they operate or the geology and chemistry of the earth's surface. Both topics are of great interest to boys. The study of insects, snakes, and other small fauna are also high in interest to boys but often avoided by squeamish teachers.

Physical activity has typically dominated the boys' independent time prior to entering. They enjoy climbing, wrestling, and all types of tumbling. These forms of physical education could be included as early as kindergarten.

Content of Material

Continued attention must be given to the selection of content of reading material that is high in interest to all students.

Methodology

Boys seem to have developed a learning style that can be described as physical, discovery-oriented, practically-ended and self-directed. More instructional procedures should capitalize on these processes. Manipulative materials that allow for physical movement, visual examination, and trial and error self-instruction are much more productive for boys.

Attention must also be given to the individual level of development of students. Boys lose interest quickly if they already know what is being presented and become frustrated and disinterested if they don't understand new ideas being presented.

Teachers

For some time there has existed a concern that women teachers have not related effectively with boys. This has caused many to believe that part of the solution to fair treatment is to have more male teachers in the primary grades. Research generally does not fully support the theory that men do a better job. There are examples where men have related better and where they provide more activities in physical education and the sciences and children have made equally good progress. However, the broad spectrum of research doesn't show significant difference in academic progress favoring male teachers. Probably many children could benefit socially and emotionally from contact with the proper male teacher.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, the thing that is needed most is teachers, in general, who are open, flexible and fair with students regardless of their sex or behavior patterns. Specifically boys need teachers who:

1. clearly perceive the value, worth, strengths, and needs of every student in the classroom.

2. are sensitive and fair in their interactions and grading practices with all students.

3. can cope with many behavior patterns, care equally for all despite their habits and problems and administer justice fairly with love.

4. discriminate carefully between intellectual progress, social maturity, and emotional stability

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